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THE CLUB HABIT

THE confirmed clubman is known to all of us. He is usually of middle age, neatly but not conspicuously dressed; he hates loud noises and a babel of tongues; he likes his meals well chosen and well cooked; he has a multitude of acquaintances, for the most part worth knowing; woman with him is a hobby not a pursuit. As a type he rouses the anger of the Socialist, being presumed to be a profiteer or a peer, and earns the scorn of women, since in their eyes he stands for the antithesis of domesticity. It is the prevalence of this latter theory that makes club frequenting an offence, almost a synonym for vice. "He's always at the club," spoken of husband or male relative, is a verdict and sentence all in one, for the place is looked upon as demoralising, being the lair of the confirmed bachelor where he is secure from feminine cajoleries, or, to employ a metaphor of the times, a dug-out, proof against the heaviest bombardment of invitations directed from the social batteries of Belgravia and Mayfair.

To turn from make-believe to reality—what is the reason for the wide-spread nature of the club habit? Why do men congregate together in monastic estab-

lishments, and pay heavy entrance fees and subscriptions for the privilege of so doing? Creature comforts are provided, no doubt, and the idiosyncracies of the male sex studied, in clubs. But so they are in the average private house. Easy chairs that are easy, sporting papers, tobacco in all its forms, alcohol—these are to be found in every smoking-room worthy of the name. A self-respecting individual lets no law but his run in his personal domain. No, the club habit has its roots in other soil than that of mere physical comfort. It is because a man can get complete immunity from feminine society, and all that it involves, that he frequents his club. However devoted a husband he may be, however much he may enjoy the propinquity of women, there are moments when the only thing that matters is the companionship of his own sex, when a burnt chop with a crony seems more desirable than a ten-course dinner served by a chef, with the most attractive woman in the world as his neighbour, when the prospect of a *tete-a-tete* with Helen of Troy would be less tempting than that of a chat with, say, Bill Bailey.

A man is never quite himself when wo-

men are present. Instinctively he endeavours to show himself in the most favourable light. He strives to please. He responds to the stimulus afforded by the presence of the opposite sex. He narrows his outlook to their horizon, restricts his topics to those they can appreciate. The average woman's idea of gathering the news of the day is to glance at the pictures in the morning paper; her notion of politics, to dissect the reputation of a statesman's wife. Servants, dresses, gossip, tittle-tattle of all kinds, gleaned from what is euphemistically termed "The Society Press"—these are the subjects that interest her to the exclusion of almost everything else, more especially once she has accomplished that purpose for which she was created, and secured a husband. Conversation between her and a man, when it is not an exchange of trivial topics, is a covert flirtation, stimulating enough, no doubt, to an individual eager for relaxation after the anxieties of a public or professional career, but making an appeal to only one side of his nature. As the giant Antæus renewed his strength from each contact with his mother, Earth, so does a man by a visit to his club. There he is his own master, with no wishes to consult but his own, no conventions to conform to, able to smoke, eat, talk, or sit silent without laying himself open to the charge of being unmannerly or dull. Moreover, he sees his friends as they really are, not masquerading as characters in some carnival. As there are no women to impress with his esprit and badinage, Brown displays a general knowledge that marks him as a shrewd student of affairs. Jones, no longer self-conscious and tongue-tied, proves himself a *raconteur* of the first water. Robinson, who

"—Capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute,"

removed from this dubious environment, turns out to be an authority on sport of all kinds, and a "big game" shot of experience.

Women impose an unnatural standard of conduct on their men folk. What they call good manners is, more often than not, sheer effeminacy. The pretty speech ready at the tip of the tongue for no more important occasion than passing the marmalade, the inability to do so simple a thing as lighting a pipe without first asking permission, the readiness to jump up from a chair at the shortest notice, the fluency of insincerity—"How well you're looking this morning!" or "How becoming that hat is!"—these are the qualities that nine out of ten women value in men to the exclusion of more virile attributes.

Distrust the person who says, "I have no use for a club!" The interpretation of this remark is that a club has no use for him, that his own sex, turning its back on him by reason of his unsociable, churlish nature, has abandoned him to the untender mercies of the other. If he belongs to a club his attitude implies that his fellow-members take no pleasure in his company. Thereafter let him restrict himself to cigarettes because a pipe is not allowed in the drawing-room, and his study is wanted for the children, let him grow grey handling tea-cups and taking the Pekinese out for exercise, let him dine at home every night of the week and hear what the Duchess said to Lady Mary and all the rest of it. Then, when in the course of his constitutionals about St. James' he shall see the votaries of the club habit seated in bow windows, majestic, serene, let him know himself for the renegade he is, one who has sold his birthright and walks—an outcast.—*The Saturday Review, London.*